D.S. MIRSKY: THE DEATH OF A MODERNIST

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D. S. Mirsky: A Russian Life, 1890-1939
By G. S. Smith
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Prince Dimitry Sviatopolk-Mirsky was an extraordinary man who exemplified the contradictions of his time. Born in 1890, he was a contemporary of the great poets of the Russian renaissance, the so-called Silver Age: Pasternak, Akhmatova, Mandelstam, and Tsvetaeva. A prince turned Communist, an émigré who despised his exiled compatriots, a cosmopolitan and a Eurasian nationalist, who was a failed poet (his book of verse published in 1911 was panned by Gumilev), but a brilliant literary critic, Mirsky brought Russian literature to the English public in a history text that remained definitive from the time it appeared to the end of the twentieth century. Comprising two volumes that were later abridged in one, his *Contemporary Russian Literature, 1881-1925* (1926) and *History of Russian Literature from the Earliest Times to the Death of Dostoevsky (1881)* (1927), were translated into German, Italian, and French. They remained largely inaccessible to his compatriots until 1992, when a Russian translation was published in London. Neither the history, nor his trenchant essays published in English or Russian during the decade in emigration seem to have come from the same pen as some of his hack writing after the return to the USSR in 1932. A believing Communist, Mirsky wrote politically correct criticism in his native country, but this did not protect him from sharing the tragic fate of his contemporaries, including Osip Mandelstam—arrest in 1937 and death in the same labor camp in Magadan in 1939.

The long-awaited magisterial biography *D. S. Mirsky: A Russian –English Life, 1890-1939* by G. S. Smith (Oxford, 2001) is the authoritative study of this key and controversial figure in Russian letters. Smith takes up the challenge of understanding the complex and enigmatic man who happened to live and actively participate in Russia's "terrible years." His declaration of purpose is direct and understated: "There is no detailed account of what Mirsky did and where he did it , much less a sustained enquiry into why and how he did it" (xvii). The author's approach amply demonstrates that it would be impossible to understand Mirsky, an idiosyncratic individual who often puzzled and unnerved his contemporaries, without delving into specific circumstances of his time.

Smith interviewed important personal friends and people who knew Mirsky before his return. Although much of Mirsky's correspondence had been lost, the complete series of his letters to Dorothy Galton and P. P. Suvchinsky constituted an important source of biographical information, along with the NKVD files on Mirsky's arrest which became accessible after 1991. His personal papers confiscated upon arrest appear to have been lost. Smith posits the critical questions in his project; he makes every possible effort to dispel the ambiguities and controversies associated with Mirsky, the myths surrounding his private life, his political activity in Europe, and the circumstances

leading to his return to Soviet Russia, undertaken despite his better judgment and considerable knowledge of the conditions there.

As an aristocrat from one of Russia's oldest family lines, Mirsky received a superior humanist education at home and in the renowned Tenishev gymnasium. Already as a young student, he gravitated towards the artistic bohemian culture, especially the poetic and homosexual circles of pre-revolutionary Petersburg associated with Mikhail Kuzmin. The chapter titled "Two Callings" describes Mirsky's further schooling, academic and military. In 1908 he entered St. Petersburg University and participated in Professor Semen Vengerov's Pushkin seminar, where the first generation of professional Pushkinists was trained, along with the future Formalists. During his three years at the University, Mirsky also studied Oriental languages. Without completing his course of study, he joined the army in 1911 and as a member of the Imperial Guards regiment he enjoyed the high society life of the capital. He returned to the University in 1913, but rejoined his regiment when war was declared, and continued active military service through the Civil War, escaping via the southern route in 1920.

Mirsky came to England in 1921 with the assistance of Maurice Baring, who knew and visited the family before the Revolution, and began teaching at the University of London. He soon became a prominent intellectual. As an elite cosmopolitan exile with independent views, he was prominent in British literary society. As his Russian criticism shows, he was less than fond of the Russian intelligentsia and its self-appointed role as traditional guardian of the people and national culture. The facts of Mirsky's early biography help explain his particular position in Russian letters and the reasons why he did not identify with either the *raznochintsy* of the Russian intelligentsia in his homeland, or those in emigration. He analyzed literary history from a Russian but also a cosmopolitan perspective (hence the appropriately hyphenated title of the biography), which enabled him at one and the same time to act on behalf of, but also to counteract, his native culture and its intellectual traditions.

Smith justly attests that "of the Russian intellectuals of his generation, very few could match his knowledge of Western European languages and cultures, but there was nobody else of any stature who combined this knowledge with an awareness of the cultures of Asia based on first-hand linguistic study" (47). Smith sheds light on Mirsky's "particular and unique position in Russian letters" as a man of inordinate talent and training. Like his contemporary Formalists, who were his classmates in the Vengerov seminar, he was modern and innovative in his approach to literary study, yet he was not an academic but "a practical critic with a primary interest in current literary events" (50). Just how extraordinary Mirsky's achievement was can be surmised if we compare his concise and groundbreaking history of *Contemporary Russian Literature: 1881-1925* to that edited by his university teacher, Semen Vengerov, whose ponderous *History of Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, published in 1914, represents the first attempt to describe and make sense of the various trends in Russian modernism and its "motley disorder" (*pestryi besporiadok*). [1] It is worthy of note that future histories of the Silver Age would not be forthcoming until the publication of a collective seven-volume project of twentieth-century Russian literary history in France in 1986.[2]

Smith is careful to distinguish the successive periods in Mirsky's life as they coincide with turning points in Russian history. He considers the implications of the fact that Mirsky identified with the post-Symbolist generation of Gumilev and Kuzmin, whom Mirsky describes as belonging to the "second generation of 'modernists' ... more bohemian than bourgeois." As their younger contemporary, Mirsky also became a witness and a first serious chronicler of their significance in literary history. This is in sharp contrast with the tensions that mark the creative biography of Vladislav Khodasevich, who was conscious of having been born "between generations," thus neither a Symbolist nor an Acmeist.

In his later study, *Russia: A Social History* (London, 1931), Mirsky characterized his generation as "free from the *fin-de-siècle*

1. S. A. Vengerov, ed. *Russkaia literatura XX veka, 1890-1910* (Moscow, 1914-1916.), 2 vols.

2. *Histoire de la littérature Russe. Le XXe Siècle*, edited by Efim Etkind, Georges Nivat, Ilia Serman and Vittorio Strada (Paris, 1987). The Russian translation of the Silver Age (Serebrianyi vek) volume was published in 1995. This was a pioneering effort, encompassing Russian émigré and Soviet material, whose comprehensive view Mirsky would have applauded. The only other study to follow Mirsky, almost 70 years later, was British Slavist Avril Pyman's superb book, *A History of Russian Symbolism*, published in 1994.

aestheticism and, for the most part, from all ideas and philosophies." Smith extrapolates convincingly that these "freedoms" constituted "the basis of that liberal and humanitarian agnosticism that among other things enabled Mirsky to write, in emigration, a history of Russian literature that lasted so many years" (57). Smith also suggests that Mirsky "came to believe that, in clearing away the enthusiams and false gods of the preceding generation, he and his contemporaries had left a vacuum at the centre..." (58). This vacuum, as Smith concludes here and demonstrates later in the book, prompted Mirsky to construct his Marxism in the late 1920s.

Mirsky's unique background prepared him to represent Russian modernism to the West as an equal in the Western context, which usually assumes Europe to be the center. Poised as he was between the two worlds, a true Russian at home in Europe and Asia, Mirsky was a cosmopolitan in the best sense of the term. He was able to understand the historical Russian ambivalence at being situated between the east and the west that formed the core of Andrei Bely's *Petersburg* (1911-1913), a representative novel of Russian modernism that has been compared to James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Unlike Bely, Mirsky regarded Russia's position between the two worlds as a strength, rather than a tragic split. Hence writing about Russian modernism whose achievement, if anything, was on the par with the best in Europe, was also close to the heart of Mirsky, the Eurasianist.

Understandably, Smith devotes a considerable part of the biography to Mirsky's émigré years, since they comprised a decade of intense and prolific critical activity, conducted in English, French and Russian language publications. While teaching at the University of London, Mirsky wrote for the *London Mercury*, the *Slavonic Review*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*, and was instrumental in bringing contemporary Russian literature to the attention of the British public. As an active contributor to major émigré publications, Mirsky strove at once to bridge the gap between his conservative readers and European modernism, as well as its dynamic Soviet counterpart. His was a virtuoso polemical performance, whose clear critical vision strikes the reader to this day.

Scholars of the Russian diaspora note the relatively fluid borders that allowed travel and contact between the young Soviet Union and the European centers of emigration in Prague, Berlin, and Paris.[3] The separation between the homeland and Russia Abroad occurred with political shifts in the Soviet Union in 1925, when a quest for the self-definition of the diaspora began in earnest, with such questions as "There or Here?" and "One or Two Literatures," posed by one of its leading poets and critics, Vladislav Khodasevich. This is when conservative cultural politics of the diaspora began to define its role as that of preservation of national tradition and its great literature, threatened in the land of the Bolsheviks.

In their utmost concern for aesthetic standards as an assurance of literary continuity, both Mirsky and Khodasevich argued against émigré conservatism and for the necessity of artistic innovation independent from politics. For example, both had championed Marina Tsvetaeva since 1925 as the greatest poet in emigration and wrote insightful criticism of her work that remains valuable to this day. Both argued with the émigré denial of Soviet literature for political reasons. However, Mirsky's ungenerous appraisal of Khodasevich as a poet led to bitterness and, as Smith remarks, "the spectacle of the two most gifted critical minds of the emigration tearing at each other ... is one of the most dismal in the unhappy story of Russia Abroad" (154).

Indeed, Mirsky's responses to the questions posed by Khodasevich were categorical and swift. Russia Abroad was the periphery and not the center of cultural activity, which was located in Soviet Russia, where dynamic social change was underway. It is useful for the reader to understand that Mirsky's consistent defense of modernism is carried out in the context of modernity—the declared thrust of revolutionary Soviet society of the time—and this approach remained steady in his critical writing through the late twenties. His important polemical essays on the subject appeared in the two issues of the Belgian journal, *Blagonamerennyi*, published in 1926, which also featured Remizov and Tsvetaeva. The first issue of the journal opened with Mirsky's programmatic statement that the reason for the journal's appearance was "to insist on the right of literary criticism to judge on the basis of literary merit." In writing "O sostoianii nyneshnei russkoi literatury" (On the Current State of Russian Literature), Mirsky

3. See: Marc Raeff, *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration* (New York, 1990).

challenges both the Soviet and émigré critics: "To approach literature with political criteria, as do *The Russian Times*, *Resurrection*, *Red Virgin Soil*, and Zinaida Gippius is, of course, nonsensical, and not only for literary reasons, but for political ones as well."[4] However, Mirsky takes a sharp turn with a clear challenge to the émigrés as he asserts that "Russian literature finds more *joie de vivre* after the Revolution, then it did before it." Among the best writers living in the Soviet Union Mirsky singles out Mandelstam, Pasternak, and Babel, referring to them as "*inorodtsy,*" using the official term designating foreign nationals in the Russian Empire (here Jewish), thus signaling the cosmopolitanism of Russian literature.

In his razor-sharp piece "On Conservatism. A Dialogue," which appears in the second issue of the journal, Mirsky derides the émigré literary conservator, proclaiming that "restoration in literature is as impossible as it is in politics ..." [5] He questions whether a Russian "who loves the national culture, ought to be a literary and national conservator." He responds in the negative that "there is nothing to conserve." Instead, Mirsky stresses the importance of the "literary process and its "ceaseless dynamic," asserting that "restoration exists neither in politics, nor in culture" and that "art is a creation of new values."[6] In this statement, Mirsky places himself squarely on the side of the literary avant-garde and the Formalist critics in the USSR. A year earlier he had written what remains one of the best accounts of the formative period of Formalist theorizing (1922-1924) in *Sovremennye zapiski* (1925). One can see how Mirsky attempts to educate and prod his reader to appreciate the difficult modernist literature and ends with the ironic statement that "Pasternak and Marina Tsvetaeva may not be immediately appreciated, but I also have to make an effort to get to the British Museum from my house."[7]

The most provocative gesture that year was Mirsky's lecture on "The Ambience of Death in Pre-revolutionary Russian Literature," delivered before a Parisian émigré audience. Here Mirsky denied the value of the pre-revolutionary cultural renaissance, pronouncing it as imbued with a sense of death and decomposition, symptomatic of the decline of the empire. This argument concluded with the ominously ponderous statement that "for a quarter of a century our literature (and not just literature) has been preparing us for death" (quoted in Smith, 135). This position galled his contemporaries in the audience: Merezhkovsky, Berdyaev, and Khodasevich left the lecture without engaging in a discussion. Along with them, the reader is left to wonder what could lead Mirsky to contradict his own championing of Russian modernism and the poetic achievements of his generation in *Contemporary Russian Literature, 1881-1925*, published that same year, except perhaps to redirect the attention of his peers, "blinded by political rage," to look at the brilliant writing in the young Soviet Union.

In this context it would have been of interest to note that Mirsky was also in disagreement with another contemporary, V. Ivanov-Razumnik, a prominent pre-revolutionary critic who remained in Soviet Russia and whose edited collection of essays, titled *Russkaia literatura. Sbornik statei*, was published in Leningrad in 1925 with difficulty and without his name.[8] In his introduction to the volume, Ivanov-Razumnik proclaimed this as a proper moment for a "look back" at the past, since "a critical appraisal of the immediate past is alone capable of explaining the phenomena of today and mapping out the plausible path of tomorrow." [9]

In the essay titled "Vzgliad i nechto" (A Glance and Something), published under the pseudonym of Ippolit Udush'ev, he draws a line between the earlier period of modernism whose achievements in the first quarter of the century were, in his judgment, so superb as to be considered the Golden Age, followed by the inevitable decline already in the present and in the near future.[10] There is no mention of this book in the biography and it would be fascinating to know whether Mirsky had read it before his talk. Moreover, Mirsky's controversial stance would be counteracted in the early thirties by the émigré poets and critics who would launch a

4. "O nyneshnem sostoianii russkoi literatury," in *Uncollected Writings on Russian Literature* (Berkeley, 1989), p. 226.

5. *Blagonamerennyi*, no. 2 (1926): 90.

6. Ibid., 87.

7. Ibid., 92.

8. Aleksandr Lavrov and John Malmstad, "Preduvedomlenie k perepiske," Andrei Bely i Ivanov-Razumnik: Perepiska. Publication, introduction and commentary by A. V. Lavrov and J. Malmstad (St. Petersburg, 1998), p. 22.

9. Ibid., p. 161.

10. "Vzgliad i nechto," *Russkaia literatura. Sbornik statei* (Leningrad, 1925), 161.

campaign to assert the great poetic and cultural achievements of the so-called Silver Age, thus rescuing it from oblivion.

This dynamic phase of Mirsky's life included his promising and at times brilliant Eurasian journal *Versty,* a controversial publishing venture of great historical importance, which ended in frustration over the finances and logistics of producing such a journal. In following the tortuous history of Mirsky's work on the journal, Smith relies on his correspondence with P. P. Suvchinsky, a Eurasianist and a fellow member of the editorial board, along with S. Efron. As chief editor of the journal, Mirsky sought to establish a venue for exploring new directions in literature. His editorial statement in the first issue in 1926 registers a rather ambitious vision for the journal that is worth noting here. He insists on the primacy of artistic over political values (which dominate Soviet as well as émigré publications), aiming to publish the best. He also proclaims the aims of the journal to be cosmopolitan, reaching beyond the narrow Russian interests to the European context (surprising for an Eurasian journal), a stance similar to the one taken by *Sovremennyi zapad* (1922-1924), edited by Kornei Chukovsky and Evgeny Zamyatin, two prominent Anglophiles on the Soviet scene, at whose request Mirsky contributed an article on contemporary English poetry in 1923. The journal published contemporary Soviet literature as well as translations of Western modernists, along with regular reviews of the émigré publications. The short life of this journal and the fact that LEF had ceased publication in 1926, led Mirsky to envision a journal that would fill the vacuum existing in Russia abroad, except for *Volia Rossia,* which he considered the most vital journal in emigration.

Although Mirsky wrote that *Versty* could not pretend to "unite all of the best and the most alive (vsego, chto est' luchshego i samogo zhivogo) in contemporary Russia literature, to do so selectively was clearly his intent. A journal published abroad, however, could point the émigré reader's attention in that direction, stating that this would be easier to realize from "the outside" or "the periphery" (*so storony* could be understood as either) than in Russia. While emphasizing the journal's cosmopolitan modernity, Mirsky also made a "supranational" argument. He points out that what is "Russian is greater than Russia itself" (*russkoe* bol'she samoi Rossii), and shows how he perceived and delineated the possibilities for a dynamic literary life at the time. However, he also equates this russianness with "modernity" or "contemporaneity" (*sovremennost'*) as its "particular and most acute expression" (osoboe i naibolee ostroe vyrazhenie).[11] The emphasis on *sovremennost'* recalls the position of the foremost Soviet literary journal, *Red Virgin Soil.* Along with Soviet writers, the first issue of *Versty* featured his two favorite authors, Marina Tsvetaeva and Aleksei Remizov, who remained the sole representatives of émigré literature on its pages.

Not surprisingly, the first issue of *Versty* was greeted by a negative response from both sides of the border. Khodasevich wrote an indignant review in *Contemporary Notes* with allegations of pandering to the Soviets and not acknowledging the difficulties writers faced there, but also of denigrating the terrible conditions of writers in emigration.[12] Unbeknownst to Khodasevich, dismissal of the first issue was delivered on the Soviet side by M. Arseniev, Political Editor of the Leningrad branch of Soviet censorship (Glavlit): "The entire collection is saturated with an anti-Soviet tendency and with hatred for the Bolsheviks" (quoted in Smith, 155). While Smith does not mention whether Mirsky knew about this directly (although Arsen'ev's judgment was found among Suvchinsky's papers), he was certainly aware that *Versty* was unacceptable in the homeland, since no subscription for it was forthcoming. The double jeopardy in which the daring endeavor had found itself confirms Khodasevich's diagnosis of the state of Russian literature in 1925 as "ailing both here and there," a fact which Mirsky seemed unable to accept.[13]

In keeping with Mirsky's vision, the second issue issue of *Versty* contained superb selections of contemporary Soviet prose, such as Tynianov's historical novel, *Kiukhlia,* Artem Vesely's *Insurrection,* and Andrei Bely's *Moscow under the Hammer.* Translation of important Western criticism, Forster's *Aspects of the Novel,* as well as Mirsky's review of T.S. Eliot's *Poems, 1905-1925* were also included. The publication of Rozanov's

11. D. S. Mirsky, *Versty*, no. 1 (1926): 1.

12. V. Khodasevich, "O Verstakh." *Sovremennye zapiski*, no. 29 (1926): 433-441.

13. "Tam ili zdes'?" *Dni,* no. 804 (25 September 1925); Rpt. in V. Khodasevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 2 (Ann Arbor, 1992), 368.

The Apocalypse of Our Time with its attacks on Socialism and Commmunism in the literary supplement of the 1927 issue leads Smith to conclude that Mirsky could "only have been flirting with Communism at the time" (158).

Concerning the journal's Eurasianist position, Smith remarks that "if the first issue of *Vyorsts* had not been in any real sense 'Eurasian' except for the formal association with the name of Suvchinsky, the contents of the second and third have a much stronger connection with the movement" (159). He cites a striking passage from an earlier letter to Suvchinsky that sheds light on Mirsky's attitude towards both Eurasianism and politics. In his response to a request for an article on August 11, 1923, Mirsky admits that he is "so lacking in seriousness that he's Eurasian in even years and a European in odd ones. In general, though, I am a man without convictions and a born (though not always open) enemy of ideas in general ... (142).

Smith devotes considerable attention to the Eurasianists, since their activity was couched in mystery and surrounded by suspicion of collaboration with the Soviets. He clarifies the situation concerning Tsvetaeva's husband, Sergei Efron, because of whose justly suspected work as a Soviet agent, Tsvetaeva was ostracized by the émigré community prior to her own return to the Soviet Union. An informed discussion of these matters and of the political expression of the group in the newspaper *Eurasia*, to which Mirsky contributed some journalistic pieces, sheds light on the various political views within the group and on its disintegration by 1929, which contributed to Mirsky's decision to go east. And in 1929, when the newspaper *Eurasia* came to an end, Mirsky wrote: "My 'materialist' heart rebelled against this so-called 'reason' which held it prisoner for nearly a quarter of a century ... I had made contact with Marx" (quoted in Smith, 163). In a fascinating and detailed discussion of Eurasianism and its pro-Soviet politics, Smith discusses Mirsky's contribution in the newspaper *Eurasia* that eventually led to a schism in the movement: "Mirsky essentially redefines Eurasianism in the spirit of his nascent Marxism ..." and renders the movement superfluous (179).

As Smith suggests, by seeking a way out of the "vacuum" of his generation, Mirsky moves from his identification as a modernist to that of a Communist, following his meeting with Mayakovsky, the leading poet of the left avant-garde who visited Paris in 1928. However, this identification, expressed in Mirsky's obituary essay "Dve smerti" (Two Deaths), and written shortly after Mayakovsky's tragic suicide in 1930, seems a strategic move rather than an expression of the deep connection which he had with the second-generation modernists, whose aesthetics of refined and cultivated rebellion were much closer to him. In his 1926 essay "On the Present State of Russian Literature," cited earlier, Mirsky singled out the great living Russian poets Akhmatova, Pasternak, Mandelstam, and Tsvetaeva, but saw Mayakovsky as someone who was past his prime and no longer creative. In "Dve smerti," Mirsky proclaims that Mayakovsky's suicide marked the end of the age of the individual artist, a product of bourgeois society, even though the poet was on the side of the Revolution. Mirsky states that the objective reason for Mayakovsky's suicide was a realization that his kind of art is not needed in the Soviet land. Mirsky does not adumbrate on specific reasons for this situation, clearly reluctant to enter the dynamics of cultural politics of the First Five-Year Plan, though he never misses an opportunity to do so on the émigré side. Instead, he submits the poet to "uncompromising Marxist categories" (188) and the harsh judgment of history, to which he would in turn be submitted before the decade was over.

It would be fair to conclude that despite his usual critical acuity, Mirsky did not address the myth of the Russian poet as Roman Jakobson had, nor of the revolutionary poet as the French Surrealists would, considering the poet's suicide as the ultimate act of transgression.[14] Nor did Mirsky comprehend Mayakovsky's real importance as a representative poet of Soviet modernity and its contradictions, about which Marina Tsvetaeva wrote so eloquently.[15] Their close friendship and subsequent disagreements form another "sad page" of émigré literary history that Smith features in the biography. Although Smith does not state so specifically, as a poet-critic Tsvetaeva becomes another serious interlocutor, who, along with Khodasevich, would continue to argue with

14. For an excellent account of the Russian and French interpretations of the myth of the poet, see Svetlana Boym, "The Death of the Revolutionary Poet" in her *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

Mirsky's assessments in the early thirties. Tsvetaeva provides an excellent counterbalance to Mirsky in her stunning essay "Poet and Time,' published in 1932, two years after his obituary "Dve smerti."

In this context it is fascinating to recreate the turning point in their thinking as it parallels literary history and read the two essays side by side as a dialogue that strikes the nerve of the epoch. As Mirsky considers the predicament of the poet in history, his juxtaposition of Pushkin, the nineteenth-century Russian national poet whose death also marked the end of an era, and of Mayakovsky, the Soviet poet, was itself an anathema for the conservative émigré guardians of classical Russian culture. Taking up Mirsky's arguments concerning the relationship of modernism and modernity, Tsvetaeva opens her essay with a quote that seems to continue his "Dialogue. On Conservatism," with a typical statement of an average émigré reader that both scorn: "I really love art, but only not contemporary" and the counter-statement: "I love verse, but only contemporary."[16] She follows Mirsky in the juxtaposition of Pushkin and Mayakovsky, but to very different ends. In recognizing the fact that "history is inescapable" (iz istorii ne vyskochish'), Tsvetaeva argues for poetry as a supratemporal art, declaring that "there is not art ... that is not contemporary" (ne sovremennogo ... iskusstva net).[17] She is in concord with both Mirsky and Khodasevich, stating that "restoration is not art," but in a retort to Mirsky she extolls the artistic individual talent as being "beyond time" (*vne-vremennyi*). She proclaims that "contemporaneity" is not her time and argues that the "contemporariness" of a poet is not in in the contents of the verse, but often despite it—in its sound. She declares the "marriage of poet and time—a forced marriage."[18]

In this polemical statement on aesthetic modernism, Tsvetaeva draws a timely distinction between its representative "revolutionary poet" and the "poet of the revolution" (*chantre de la révolution*), who champions modernity. In declaring Mayakovsky a unique poet who exemplified both, Tsvetaeva appears more attuned to the challenges of modernity that she and her poetic peers—Mayakovsky, Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Pasternak, and Khodasevich—were facing on both sides of the border. She is in agreement with the latter's essay, "*Literatura v izgnanii*" (Literature in Exile), published the following year, which affirms the validity of poetry in exile, with such precedents as Dante, the Polish Romantic poets, and the poets of the Hebrew renaissance. Like Tsvetaeva, Khodasevich proclaimed the art of poetry to be beyond the social and political demands of its time, and outside territorial boundaries. In his assertion that national literature "is created by its language and spirit, and not the territory where it dwells, nor by the life it reflects," Khodasevich reiterates the principle of separation of national culture from the state, thus entering a larger conversation on the predicament of exile in the twentieth century.[19] By this time, however, Mirsky was in the Soviet Union, literally beyond reach and beyond modernism, as he turned to Marxism with characteristic passion and single-mindedness.

If we consider the sum of Mirsky's intense dialogue with his prominent compatriots in the diaspora, it becomes clear that his mission was to shake up the conservative émigré attitude, while seeking connections with the homeland he considered essential. This period of sustained literary activity and Mirsky's critical position provides one of the many possible reasons for his return which Smith explores at length. If we look at the body of Mirsky's work up until his departure, it affords significant insight into his views on literary modernity and their implications for the problems of ideology (Marxism) and nationalism in relation to literature at home and abroad. Many of his statements ring true today as Russian literature is being reconsidered in its totality by both Western and native scholars. His views appear in a new light in current reconsiderations of Russian literary and cultural history at the end of the twentieth century,

15. M. Tsvetaeva, "Poet i vremia," *Izbrannaia proza v dvukh tomakh, 1917-1937*, vol. 1 (New York, 1970), 367.

16. Ibid., 370.

17. Ibid., 379.

18. Ibid.

19. See Erich Auerbach, "Philology and Weltliteratur." Translated with an introduction by E. Said,. *The Centennial Review*, vol. 13 (1969): 17.

but also in the context of recent critical discussions of modernism in the West.[20]

In documenting events leading to Mirsky's decision, Smith sheds light on Gorky's role. Mirsky's assertion of not being "a man of ideas," his choice of publications in *Versty*, his defense of esthetics apart from politics, all demonstrate his independence of judgment, which remained intact during his meeting with Gorky when he went to Sorrento with Suvchinsky during the Christmas vacation of 1927-1928. Smith shows from Mirsky's skeptical response to Gorky's invitation to return to Russia that he had no illusions about Gorky's personality or his politics. Nor did he harbor illusions about how he and others like him would be regarded by Soviet authorities. However, Mirsky thought the meeting with Gorky important in recounting his intellectual development after joining the Communist Party in 1931 as "the first contact with 'the other side of the barricade' and our first breath of pure materialist air..." (quoted in Smith, 166). Smith surmises that Mirsky probably thought of going to Russia on a visit just as Gorky had been able to do, when he informed him of his decision to return in 1929.

For the next couple of years Mirsky is engaged in Communist Party work in England, making speeches at rallies and writing for the *Labour Monthly*, edited by Palme Dutt. Smith notes that the first of the articles presented Soviet Dialectical Materialism to the British Left. Mirsky's contemporary, the prominent Italian Communist, Antonio Gramsci, then in Mussolini's prison, was impressed with his intelligent analysis and deemed it "worthy of study."[21]

Thus, the end of Eurasianism, compounded with personal disappointments, and conflicts with university colleagues, particularly Bernard Pares, all contribute to Mirsky's decision. In a chapter pointedly titled "Why Mirsky Went Back," Smith quotes the impression of the preeminent writer of the Bloomsbury group, Virginia Woolf, who upon saying good-bye to Mirsky thought that "soon there'll be a bullet through your head. That's one of the results of the war, this trapped cabin'd man" (quoted in Smith, 209). Baffled by this decision, contemporaries cited various reasons. Lavrin thought of Mirsky's patriotism, while Gleb Struve saw this irresponsible action as another mischievous prank and the result of his "instinctive unconformism" (quoted in Smith, 210). Smith also makes it quite clear that Mirsky did not want to be on the periphery, but in the center—in fact, for him the periphery was not only Russia Abroad, but all of bourgeois Europe with its retrogade politics, economic depression and the spectre of another world war looming ahead. Smith astutely considers Mirsky's departure as logical in the general sense of crisis in the West, when many European and British intellectuals turned to the Left, concluding that "Mirsky seems to have been able to live with inescapable contradiction between Marxist determinism and godless post-Nietzschean willed forging of destiny" (211).

The last part of the biography, "Back in Russia, 1932- 1939," is a triptych, where each striking title represents the successive stages in the last period of Mirsky's life. In "The Rising Line," Smith's cogent account offers considerable insight into the day-to-day political infighting and the resulting jostling in the literary cultural institutions of the thirties. A rational man and a convinced Marxist, such as Mirsky, could not have foreseen or imagined the extent of Stalin's irrational schemes. Mirsky was a man out of step with the times as the new generation of men in their thirties formed the new power elite, while he became increasingly isolated, although he continued to work intensively up until his arrest.

Smith painstakingly amasses the available documents, personal accounts (he notes how those living in the West who knew Mirsky were much more willing to speak about him than the Russians), and published sources that have emerged since the perestroika period through the nineties, in order to compose the pieces that constitute the narrative of the turbulent years between the First Writer's Congress in 1934 and Mirsky's arrest in 1937. During this time Mirsky attends meetings at the Writers' Union and is an active contributor to the literary press, and as Smith notes, "his industry was if anything more remarkable once he got started in Russia than it had been in England," so that the five Soviet years account for a quarter of his total

20. For discussions of modernism and modernity, see Marshall Berman, *All That Is Modern Melts Into Air* (New York, 1983); Hal Foster, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, 1983); Andreas Hyussen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, 1986).

21. Gramsci's *Prison Letters*, translated and introduced by Hamish Hamilton (London, 1988), 154.

publications (252). Although the larger history of this period is familiar, the unfolding of this particular story acquires extraordinary pathos and suspense as Smith masterfully leads the reader through each literary scandal or misstep in Mirsky's critical activity, when going in the wrong direction or after the wrong person at this time of officially sanctioned cannibalism spelled distaster. Such, for example, was the story of Mirsky's 1934 review of Aleksandr Fadeev's novel, *The Last of the Udege*, which he panned as unworthy of a Soviet writer, when Fadeev was already ensconced in Stalin's entourage.

Gorky watched over Mirsky as he had promised when they met in Sorrento and came to Mirsky's defense on many occasions. He was responsible not only for Mirsky's work on publications in the Foreign Literature series, but also for his participation as part of the writers' contingent sent to the grand construction sites, such as the White Sea Canal and History of the Factories. Smith cites one witness account which attests to "Mirsky's lack of sensitivity to his own position in his new surroundings ..." (248). As part of a writer's group visiting the canal site after its completion in 1933, Mirsky asked strikingly provocative questions about the conditions leading to the swift completion of the construction and the unpaid labor of prisoners, all shrouded in secrecy. On this occasion, "Mirsky's insistent questioning made the assembled writers feel awkward" (247).

At this time, Mirsky's critical activity was adamantly Marxist. While in Leningrad in 1933 he participated in the discussion of the Academy's Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House) on eighteenth-century Russian literature and publishes his "most doctrinaire" essay on the subject. In his essay on "The Problem of Pushkin," which appears later that year in *Literary Heritage*, Mirsky critiques recent scholarship and comments on its "national narrowness": "We do not have a single history of a pan-European literature that includes Russian literature, nor a history of Russian literature that sees it as part of European literature" (quoted in Smith, 260).

As Smith demonstrates in "The Falling Line" chapter, Mirsky's situation began to worsen in 1935 as writers became subject to closer scrutiny. In his presentation at the II Plenum, whose main topic of discussion was literary criticism, Mirsky defended the critics as more cultured than the writers and was attacked in turn. In 1935 he wrote two survey articles about Soviet poetry published during the previous year, stating that the non-Russian poets were the best as represented in the translations by Tikhonov and Pasternak, with whom he was in contact and writes about. He did not mention either Akhmatova nor Mandelstam, whose first arrest came in that year.

Mirsky himself becomes a prominent target on the Moscow literary front. Neither Mirsky's Marxist approach to Western literature (he wrote on James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and modern British poetry), nor his Marxist but cosmopolitan approach to Pushkin, whom he saw as a poet representative of his class considered in the European context, were "in step" with the Stalinist thirties. Ironically, the Pushkin essay "soon became a pretext of near high treason" (260). Mirsky's days were numbered and he showed signs of distress and depression to the occasional visiting Brit who met him in the Natsional restaurant, which Mirsky frequented on occasion to indulge the habits of his former life—a taste for excellent food and drink.

Although Smith is primarily concerned with the Russian Mirsky in the bulk of the biography, it is ironic that in these final chapters we find out more about Mirsky's attitude to the British literary culture of his time through his writing on it in the Soviet Union, especially his strident critique of *The Intelligentsia of Great Britain* (1935), translated by Alec Brown, whose publication caused a sensation in Britain. With the collaboration of Leningrad's best translators, Mirsky edited the anthology *Contemporary British Poetry* (*Antologiia novoi angliiskoi poezii*), a major publishing project for the times. The project was nearing completion in 1937, when Mirsky was arrested. His name was deleted and the name of one of the contributors was used instead when the volume appeared in 1937. It remained the best such anthology for decades to come: Joseph Brodsky learned about W.H. Auden from it as a young man.

Smith painstakingly reconstructs the story of Mirsky's arrest and time in the camps in the last chapter, "The End of the Line," through recourse to the available NKVD files that include the transcription of the interrogations. However, the extreme bureaucracy of the dfferent KGB agencies makes it nearly impossible to obtain and coordinate various reports and, as Smith attests, "the story of his case is incomplete in many respects. Only an unrestricted investigation of the KGB archives, more than the work of one lifetime, would enable

the full story to be told and set in its proper context" (304).

In retrospect, Mirsky's contribution appears extraordinary. If we consider the sum of Mirsky's intense dialogue with his prominent compatriots in the diaspora, it becomes clear that his mission was to shake up the conservative émigré attitude, while seeking connections with the homeland he considered essential. This period of sustained literary activity and Mirsky's critical position provides one of the many possible reasons for his return which Smith explores at length. Mirsky remained close to the utopian left avant-garde even after its demise, especially if we consider the terms in which he envisioned the modern, where artistic modernism and social and political "progress" went hand in hand. No doubt this was one of the reasons that propelled him to return to the Soviet Union, where he sought a social reality more attuned to his idealist Marxist thinking. Despite his ideological position, his literary judgments retained an affinity with the younger modernists with whom he had identified and whom he admired. Along with some of the best members of his generation, Mirsky became dispensable, a part of the dystopian history of these turbulent times.

Despite radical changes of ideology before and after his return to the Soviet Union, Mirsky's approach to literature and his aesthetic pronouncements retained astonishing integrity. In one of his public lectures in Britain in 1923, he spoke to the Brontë Society at Leeds about the sisters not only as English writers but, along with Shakespeare, as belonging to the world at large (quoted in Smith, 95). As we can see from this talk and his Pushkin essay, written in the Soviet Union ten years later, his cosmopolitan perspective on national literature had not changed. If we look at the body of Mirsky's work as a whole, it affords significant insight into his views on literary modernity and their implications for the problems of ideology (Marxism) and nationalism in relation to literature at home and abroad. His approach appears in a new light in current reconsiderations by Russian and Western scholars of Russian literary and cultural history at the end of the twentieth century.

He makes an invaluable posthumous contribution to recent critical discussions of modernism and modernity in the West. In retrospect, Mirsky remained supremely "out of step" with the times he lived in, but he was actually ahead of his time in considering literature not as a narrowly defined national entity, but in terms of belonging to the world.

As an extended social and cultural history of the period before and more then two decades after the October Revolution, this landmark study encompasses the history of the Russian diaspora and of Stalin's Cultural Revolution of the thirties. This trenchant biography of a remarkable cultural figure will become an indispensable work for scholars of twentieth-century Russian and Soviet literature and culture.

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